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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 0633  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: LIFE ON THE STEPPE, May 1-8

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¶1. This is another in a series of weekly cables drawn mostly from public media, as well as think-tank, NGO, and opposition web-sites, selected to show the diversity of life in Kazakhstan, and information about it available to citizens of Kazakhstan. Our goal is to choose what might interest and be of use to various end-users in Washington and -- especially -- to provide a more complex view from the other side of the world, illustrating the vitality (and sometimes the quirkiness) of discourse available to citizens of Kazakhstan.

UNKNOWN ARSONIST BURNS POPULAR SHYMKENT MARKET

¶2. On April 27, a fire broke out in Shymkent's most popular market and before local firefighters managed brought it under control, a large part of the market was consumed by the blaze. As a result, hundreds local traders renting stalls and storing goods in the market found themselves impoverished overnight. Fortunately, despite significant property damage, the fire did not claim any lives, since the market was being sanitized on the day of the fire and the normally busy market was almost empty. That, however, was of little consolation to vendors who tried to sneak back to the burning building through a cordon of police officers. "I have lost everything," the daily newspaper Vremya quoted one of the traders. "I put all my money into those goods, and in addition I took on credit. And now everything is gone. Who will cover my losses?"

¶3. In theory, the market owners who lease out individual stalls and stores to the vendors should compensate the vendors for their losses, since they charge not only rent but also a monthly security fee. So far, however, the owners have only mentioned the possibility of discounting leases and similar bonuses as compensation, and the vendors are fuming. "How am I going to sell goods when everything I have has turned to ash?," said one anonymous vendor. "If the market has burned down, it means that the owners and their employees were unable to keep watch and failed to prevent a disaster. Now they need to compensate us." Moreover, many vendors do not have formal contracts with the market owners, and operate based on handshake agreements. This, understandably, does not give the vendors much hope of receiving fair compensation for their losses.

¶4. The market owners, meanwhile, said they suspected foul play not

long after the fire was extinguished. According to some, the market's increasing popularity has created bad blood among the competition. Several days later, local police confirmed this suspicion, as they began criminal proceedings against unnamed defendants accused of arson.

#### POWER STRUGGLE IN ASTANA CIRCUS

15. The performers of Astana's "Capital Circus" organized a general meeting to protest a court decision to return the former director of the circus to his former position. Omirbek Isabekov, a former circus performer himself and most recently the director of Astana's circus, was dismissed in March. Nominally, the reason for his dismissal was his unexcused absence from work, but there were rumors he was involved in financial fraud and racketeering. The circus performers who were unenthusiastic about Isabekov's tenure at the circus were devastated by the news of his return. At a press conference, called immediately after the court's decision, the circus troop announced that they would go on strike, should Isabekov return to the circus as its director.

16. According to press reports, Isabekov himself has so far refused to comment on the controversy. Nevertheless, the scandal, which had been contained within the circus bigtop, has now become public, as local media have picked up the story and local politicians have become involved. Mukhtar Yerketaev, deputy chairman of the Astana branch of the ruling Nur Otan party, reportedly promised to provide legal help to the artists to fight the court ruling and take up the "Isabekov case" at an upcoming party meeting. "We have to respect the ruling of the court," he said, "but we have not yet been ordered to return Isabekov to his former position."

17. The artists themselves have only one desire: "We only wish for one thing: that management allows us to do what we love most, to perform for the people."

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#### ALMATY ORGANIZES FIRST HIGH HEEL RUNNING RACE

18. On May 1, Almaty hosted its first high heels race, with more than 30 participants wearing three- to five-inch pumps running 80 meters down a central street in Almaty. However funny the idea sounds, the race was no joke, as those who suffered painful spills can attest. Some contestants gunning for the top prize of 50,000 tenge (around \$330) even used tape to tie their pumps firmly to their feet. According to one participant, long-time Almaty resident Yuliya Filippova, running in heels is just another part of living in a big city. "Of course, [I have to run in heels often], especially when catching a bus. I have been walking in four-inch high heels since I was 14 years old, so this is nothing new for me. When I found out about this race, I immediately decided to participate. And I would have won, if I not fallen." At the end of the day, everyone was happy when each competitor received at least a symbolic prize for their participation.

MILAS